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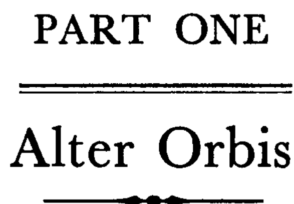

PART ONE

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I

Change in the West

'Bede, a servant of Christ and priest of the monastery of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, which is in Wearmouth and Jarrow. . .' Bede so describes himself near the end of what he regarded as the last of his major works, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*. And he continues: 'I was born on an estate of the same monastery and when I was seven years old my kinsmen entrusted me for my education to the most reverend abbot Benedict and later to Ceolfrith. Since then I have passed the whole of my life within the walls of this same monastery and devoted all my time to studying the Scriptures. Amid the observance of monastic discipline and the daily charge of singing in the church, my delight has always been in learning, teaching or writing. In the 19th year of my life I became a deacon, and in the 30th year I advanced to the office of priesthood, on each occasion at the hands of the most reverend bishop John, and at the bidding of abbot Ceolfrith. From the time when I received priest's orders until reaching the age of 59 I have concerned myself with making these brief commentaries on Holy Scripture from the works of the venerable fathers, for my own needs as well as the needs of my brethren, or even with adding something more towards their understanding and interpretation.'[1] There follows a list of his works under some twenty-five titles, making a total of some sixty separate books.

It is scarcely surprising that no account of Bede's life was written in the early years after his death, since a life such as his offered little scope to writers of the currently fashionable hagiography. Beyond the moving story of his death, written by one of his fellow-monks, there is little more to be told of either lesser incident or greater episode in the near sixty years of his life. We

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know, that towards the end of his life he visited his former pupil Egbert who, at that time, was bishop of York and that a second visit was only prevented by ill-health.[2] His description of Cuthbert's cell on Farne has sometimes been regarded as evidence that he had visited the island and it may also be that he went to Lindisfarne,[3] but even if there were other unrecorded journeys about Northumbria there are no grounds for thinking that he had travelled more widely. William of Malmesbury was certainly right in refusing to credit those who said that he had been to Rome, and rash only in believing that Pope Sergius had invited him.[4] Some of Bede's works began to circulate in England during his own lifetime, but there is no evidence that his reputation became more widespread until after his death.

The date of his terrestrial birth had no great significance for a man who regarded life as the brief pilgrimage of an exile from eternity, and later chroniclers, driven to precision by the rigidity of annals, drew differing conclusions from the little that Bede recorded about his age. He seems to say that he finished his *Ecclesiastical History* in 731 and that he was aged 59 when he compiled the list of his works which forms its epilogue, so suggesting that he was born *c.* 672, entrusted to the care of abbot Benedict *c.* 679, ordained deacon *c.* 691 and priest *c.* 702. The place of his birth is unknown though it probably lay close to either Wearmouth or Jarrow on land which was part of their original endowments. The translator of the *History* into Old English rendered Bede's Latin *natus in territorio eiusdem monasterii* by the words *acenned on sundurlonde þæs ylcan mynstres*, but the compound *sundorland* (*sundurlond*), indicating land set apart for a special purpose, is not uncommon in northern English place-names and it is wiser to regard it in this passage as translating *territorium* rather than as referring to the place now called Sunderland.[5]

Bede never refers to any of his kinsmen by name, nor is anything known about them from any other source, but we may infer that they were Christians and, in view of their association with such a man as Benedict Biscop, probably from the ranks of the well-born. At this time it was a common practice for parents

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who were anxious for their children to be educated, to entrust them to the care of a monastery at an early age, but such a step did not necessarily imply lifelong devotion to monasticism, still less any desire to be rid of an unwanted child. John, from whom in later years Bede received the orders first of deacon and then of priest, was the bishop of Hexham. It was to Acca, John's successor in the see at Hexham, that Bede dedicated most of his theological works, often expressing himself towards him in terms of the deepest affection. At 19 Bede was several years below the canonical age of 25 for ordination to the diaconate. He may have shown exceptional ability as a young man, but we do not know how strictly the canonical age for ordination was enforced in England at this time.

Not all of Bede's writings can be exactly dated, but so far as we know, his two earliest works – the *De Arte Metrica* and the *De Schematibus et Tropis* – were composed in 701 or 702, both of them being designed for the use of teachers in the schoolroom.[6] His last work was a letter which he wrote towards the end of 734, the year before his death, to his former pupil Egbert who was then bishop of York and who was to become its first *de facto* archbishop in the following year.[7] The 60 or so volumes which Bede wrote over a period of some 30 years represent his labours during those parts of his day which were not occupied by teaching in the monastic school or by the fulfilment of his prime duty, the daily observance of the monastic rule and the daily praise of God in the church. Music was one of Bede's great delights. We know that he was skilled in the recitation of vernacular English poetry and songs,[8] and it seems likely that the great interest and joy which he repeatedly shows in the music of the liturgy was first kindled by the visit of Abbot John, the *archicantor* of St Peter's church in Rome who came to Wearmouth to teach the Roman chant, possibly in the very year in which Bede entered the monastery as a boy of seven.[9]

Shortly before his death when, by his calculations the English had been living in Britain for rather less than 300 years, Bede, though not without concern for the evils seemingly foretold by the simultaneous appearance of two comets, was able to

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contemplate a Christian country whose people were enjoying times of stability, peace and prosperity. A king had lately died in Kent after ruling his kingdom for more than 34 years, Rochester had lost a bishop who was said to have been as familiar with Greek and Latin as he was with his native tongue, and in Canterbury the archbishopric had recently changed hands after a tenure of more than 37 years. The rulers of Kent, who could trace their royal ancestry far back beyond the days of Augustine, the first archbishop, had become, like the rulers of the other petty kingdoms south of Humber, subject to the suzerainty of Æthelbald, king of Mercia, who himself reigned for 41 years. North of Humber, Bede's own Northumbria was governed by a king to whom he was glad to send the first draft of his *Ecclesiastical History* for criticism and comment, and who, after reigning for 12 years, lived for a further 27 as a monk in St Cuthbert's monastery at Lindisfarne. Enjoying stability within, the English were no longer at war with their external neighbours. The Picts, now rejoicing in membership of the universal church, were observing a treaty of peace with the English, and likewise the Scots, living contentedly within their own boundaries, were not contemplating any attack against the English. Only among the Britons did hostility remain, hostility which rested partly on understandable feelings of personal antagonism towards their conquerors, but which also had a theological basis exemplified by their continuing refusal to unite in the observances of the universal catholic church.[10]

Bede was about 13 years old when Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria, was killed in battle against the Picts at Dunnichen Moss in Forfar in the summer of 685, only four months after the dedication of the new church of St Paul at Jarrow, and for the remaining 50 years of his life the records do not tell of any major battle fought anywhere in Britain, nor do they tell of any attack against Britain's coastline. Had he been born half a century earlier Bede might well have found himself involved directly in some of the many wars arising from the attempts of ambitious rulers to extend their boundaries or to win supremacy over neighbours, and had he died a little more than half a

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century later he would have witnessed the first Viking attack on his own monastery. But, in his sight, the headlands and lofty cliffs had been set to defend the earth against the raging storms of the sea not against the attacks of pirates, just as the resolute hearts of God's faithful people protected the church against the boisterous waves of persecution.[11] Neither Jarrow nor Wearmouth nor Lindisfarne nor many another coastal or island monastery could have prospered as they did unless the seas had been more their protection than their enemy. Stability had been achieved and for a while a balance was maintained.

Yet for all the serenity of his surroundings, Bede would have agreed with William of Malmesbury's description of his birthplace as lying in the most distant corner of the world, on the furthest shore of an island which some called another world (*alter orbis*) because there were not many geographers who had discovered its existence.[12] Long before Bede's birth, Gregory the Great, writing to Eulogius, bishop of Alexandria, described the English as a people who lived in a corner of the world and who, until lately, had put their trust in the worship of sticks and stones.[13] Bede himself had a deep sense of his remoteness from the centre of things, though it was a sense that would have been shared only by those few of his contemporaries who were both well-educated and widely-travelled, and certainly not by those Northumbrians who contemptuously rejected the papal letters which Wilfrid brought from Rome in the expectation that they would ensure his immediate restoration to favour.[14] In one of his commentaries Bede asked his readers not to be critical because he had written so much that he had learnt from ancient authors about the nature of trees and aromatic herbs. He had not done so out of conceit, but out of regard for the ignorance of himself and his fellow-men who had been born and bred in an island of the Ocean far outside the world. How else were they to learn about what happened in Arabia and India, Judaea and Egypt, save through the writings of those who had been there?[15]

There was one very real sense in which Bede did indeed live, if not outside, at least on the edge of the world. Some two and a half miles away from his monastery towards the north-east, on a

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low bluff commanding the entry to the Tyne, there lay the abandoned Roman fort of *Arbeia* (now South Shields), and a similar distance to the west, but on the north bank of the river, was *Segedunum* (now Wallsend), the terminal fort of the great Wall built by Hadrian to run more than 70 miles from sea to sea. This famous Wall, as Bede called it, '8 feet broad and 12 feet high in a straight line from east to west, as is manifest to onlookers even to this day',[16] formed the most northerly sector of a frontier which in the time of Diocletian (284–305) embraced the whole of Europe south of the Rhine and Danube, as well as much of Arabia and north Africa. Jerome writing in his cell at Bethlehem, Paul and Antony sharing their loaf of bread in the Egyptian desert, Augustine writing of the City of God in north Africa, Cassiodorus turning from the Italian civil service to the preservation of manuscripts in Calabria, Martin born in Pannonia to become the soldier-saint of Merovingian France, Isidore the greatest scholar of Visigothic Spain – all these men in their different ways and ages, however much they strove to withdraw from the classical world, were, nonetheless heirs to a common imperial tradition which lived long after the death of Bede, even though its nature and strength became varied by continuing change and development.

At the beginning of the fourth century the most westerly parts of the empire, including Spain, Gaul and Britain, constituted four dioceses under the terms of the administrative reforms put into effect during Diocletian's reign. When Justinian died in 565, some thirty years before Pope Gregory sent Augustine to undertake the conversion of the heathen English, the whole of these four western dioceses had been lost to imperial control save for a small part of southern Spain which had recently been re-conquered and was still subject to Byzantine rule. Even Italy itself, though now regained by Justinian's general, Belisarius, had been under the rule of an Ostrogothic king for more than 30 years. The units of imperial government had been replaced by the kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Lombards, Sueves, Visigoths and Ostrogoths, with Justinian's empire nowhere extending north of the Alps.

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All that we know of the defences of Britain late in the fourth century suggests that, had they been adequately manned, they would have been capable of protecting the country against the most vigorous assaults. But it was Britain's misfortune to lie at the edge of the world, and so to seem less and less important in the eyes of those who saw Milan under siege by Alaric or the Visigothic king, Radagaesus, leading his barbarian troops through Italian countryside, and even Rome itself sacked by barbarians in 410. In times like these the defence of a remote island could have no major place in the strategy of the generals employed by Rome. Britain ceased to be part of the empire not because the defences, behind which her citizens had enjoyed remarkable security for nearly four centuries, were overthrown in battle, but because the troops manning those defences were gradually removed either to meet more pressing needs elsewhere or to support rebels seeking to win control of the Gaulish prefecture. The sanction of effective Roman government was only intermittently at work in Britain during the years between 383 and 410, and after that date it ceased to exist. Whatever beliefs or hopes may have been held in Rome, it was never restored.

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1 *HE* V, 24.
2 *Ep. Egb.* § 1.
3 *BVC Prol.* and *c.* XVII.
4 *Gesta Regum*, *RS* I, 62–3. For later *Lives* of Bede see T. D. Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, *RS* I, i, 450–4.
5 *OE Bede*, p. 480. *Eng. Place-Name Soc.*, XXVI, 168.
6 Below pp. 249–50.
7 Below pp. 305–6.
8 *Ep. Cuthb. de Ob. Bed.*, ed. E. van K. Dobbie, 120–1.
9 Below pp. 170–2.
10 *HE* V, 23.
11 *In I Sam.* p. 24, *lines* 540–44.
12 *Gesta Regum*, *RS* I, 59.

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13 *GE* VIII, 29.
14 *EVW c.* XXXIV.
15 *In Cant. Cant. PL* XCI, 1077.
16 *HE* I, 12.

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2

Bede's View of Britain

Bede regarded Britain (*Brittania*), which he distinguished from Ireland (*Hibernia*), as an island rich in natural wealth.[1] With an abundance of crops and trees, it was well-suited for the grazing of sheep and cattle, and in some places there were vineyards. There were many kinds of birds, and it was notable for its plentiful springs and its rivers which abounded in fish, especially salmon and eels. Seals, whales and porpoises were very frequently caught round its coasts, and there were many kinds of shell-fish, including mussels which often contained the finest pearls, red, purple, amethyst or green, but most often white. There was a great abundance of cockles used to make a scarlet dye which never faded in the sun or rain, but grew ever more beautiful with age. There were salt springs, and also springs of hot water from which flowed rivers furnishing hot baths in various places suitable for people of all ages and both sexes. It was Bede's belief that the water received its heat from fire burning in the inner parts of the earth, and that when the heated water came into contact with certain metals, it was raised to boiling point and so brought to the surface of the earth.[2] Ores of copper, iron, lead and silver were plentiful, and there was an abundance of jet. Bede does not say where the ores were being worked in his day, nor does he mention tin, gold or coal. He is likely to have known about the deposits of jet at Whitby which the nuns used for making small pendant crosses,[3] whether or not they also used it for frightening snakes.

That Bede ever visited Ireland seems unlikely. He shared the geographical belief of the times that its southern shores lay far to the south of Britain, reaching down towards the north coast of Spain, and he believed that it was greatly superior to Britain in

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